DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 372 CS 001 564

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TITLE The Teacher as an Instructional Manager or Turning Informational Feedback into Pupil Progress.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, April 1974); Page 6 may reproduce poorly

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Class Management; Elementary Education; Informal Reading Inventory; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Diagnosis; Reading Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Tests; Screening Tests; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods; Test Results
IDENTIFIERS Secondary Informal Reading Inventory; Sight Sound Inventory

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question, How can the teacher become an instructional manager, turning informal feedback into pupil progress? Particular attention is given to ways teachers may use test data to help them plan lessons for the students. A number of suggestions for improving students' reading skills are also provided. (RB)

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THE TEACHER AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGER OR TURNING INFORMATIONAL FEEDBACK INTO PUPIL PROGRESS

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Convention, Chicago, April 1974.

CS 001 564

The Teacher As An Instructional Manager or Turning Informational Feedback Into Pupil Progress

- - Willadine Bain

This paper will address the question: How can the teacher become an instructional manager, turning informal feedback into pupil progress? More simply stated, in what ways may the teacher use test data to help her plan meaningful lessons for students?

Most school stystems' cumulative records on students do not include enough adequate information to allow teachers to group students or plan individualized instructional strategies either at the beginning or at any other time of the year.

At my first teaching assignment I was told to examine students' cumulative records in order to find out how children might be expected to perform in school and how then to prepare my lessons. Examples of information contained on the cumulative record were: IQ levels and standardized test scores written in terms of grade equivalents. I was to teach English and Social Studies to four classes in grades 7 and 8 (43 students per class). The IQ levels and grade equivalents in basic skills gave me a very dismal picture of my classes.

I gave the usual writing assignment to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses: "The Most Exciting Thing I Did Last Summer." I didn't know then that the topic was a most unfortunate choice for inner city students. I asked the students to read their papers aloud and soon found that in each class were students with a wide range of English/reading skills. But I had very little information which would help me to know specifically which reading subskills which students needed to learn.

Given the information I had, I somehow ascertained an average class reading level and purchased paper-backed reading skill texts and grammar books. For social studies, the class subscribed to My Weekly Reader. Common sense dictated that differentiated assignments, minimum and maximum should be given. My main efforts were exerted in keeping rather easy work interesting enough to get all students to participate in the lessons and to help faltering students when possible.

The IQ scores proved a poor barometer of performance. Some students with low IQ's were extremely well motivated and succeeded. (I suspected that their original scores may have prejudiced me concerning their potential). The grade equivalents were unreliable. Students performed at a variety of grade levels in the variety of English/reading skills with which we were concerned.

The next year, the Developmental Reading Program was mandated in the Philadelphia schools. The two master teachers in our building were assigned to teach the English department how to teach reading. We were assigned parallel preparation periods, twice a week, during which inservice sessions were held. We were observed often by the principal and the master teachers. We learned teaching techniques, ways to maintain good classroom control, and how to motivate students.

But best of all, we were instructed to Informal Testing Systems through which we might find estimates of where a student stood in the hierarchy of reading skills. We learned how to administer an Informal Reading Inventory to ascertain a student's approximate instructional level and the Botel Phonics Inventory to find his mastery of certain letter-sound combinations. But the classes were still organized according to grade equivalents and students were on 8 to 10 instructional reading levels. We taught 150 students a day and I

found it virtually impossible to pinpoint more than a few general needs for groups of students within classes.

We used other sources of information, trying to highlight specific student strengths and weaknesses in order to teach what students needed to know. We examined the item analyses of student responses on standardized tests. These told us only that few of our students had mastered much above the primary skills in language arts reading, so grouping on the basis of this printout was not practical.

I made considerable headway in teaching basic skills in English/reading skills, finding the student's interests, making certain that successes were rewarded and that all material was thoroughly learned. But many students were obediently repeating work they had already learned. The program was not specific. My department chairman was pleased with rising standardized test scores but we were covering only a small part of the Developmental Reading Guide and I knew that some students were capable of much more in specific areas. My own classroom assessments had to be quick. (It's hard to score and return 150 papers three or four times a week.) The size of the clerical task made giving informal criterion referenced tests all but impossible.

We went next to Core teaching - one teacher teaching a self contained class in junior high school English, math, science and social studies around a theme or core such as a country or a science topic. The need for knowing what groups of students <u>needed</u> to learn in each subject became even more urgent. The sheer volume of paper work did not permit proper diagnosis and prescription for groups within the classroom. Whole class instruction to the average student, with differentiated assignments to the slow and fast, was still the rule.

1970-71 began the five year reading project supported by Title I funds allotted to specific districts with The Philadelphia School District. These funds were allocated on the basis of economic and educational need. It was immediately apparent in elementary and secondary schools that there was a need to monitor pupil progress in order to evaluate programs designed to improve reading performance. Students in the inner city had been scoring well below national norms in all grades and tended to exhibit a downward trend as they proceeded through grades. We recognized that the true relationship of testing to instruction was not simply reporting, in terms of national norms, but of performing a feedback service on the progress of our reading plan and providing a basis for subsequent instruction.

First we designed a Dictek form which told us by student, by class, by school, by district, pertinent classroom characteristics, such as number of times a reading class met, aide service, basic text, instructional reading levels, and Botel Phonics Inventory scores, etc.

The result was a bulky document which gave indication of trends to the District Team and also focused teachers' attention on the necessity of recording data and completing tasks. It did not prove helpful in the actual teaching process, however.

We decided that a machine scorable diagnostic instrument for a basic reading skill would be helpful for diagnosis, prescription and choosing of materials for groups and individual students. The choice was phonics, since elementary and secondary teachers had given phonics inventories and found them useful in designing lessons through which students learned to decode. We designed a machine-scorable Sight-Sound Inventory aimed at the third grade level --- that is, it tested the phonetic elements which should have been

mastered by the end of grade 3. The test became a screening device for students above grade 3 who needed remedial work in the basic phonics skills. In grades 7-10 we found that approximately 50 percent of the students required such remediation.

The Sight Sound Inventory, as it was called, is given orally. Words are spoken. The student is asked to blacken an answer sheet under the letters he hears at the beginning, middle or end of the words or nonsense syllables he hears. If the student cannot pick out the correct response from a choice before him, we may conclude that he does not know the letter combination. The test is not dependent upon the student's writing the letter. The test does not show that the student knows the letter-sound either, as he may be guessing. But further instruction based on the test results would give further information to the teacher as to whether or not he does in fact need instruction in this fundamental step in learning to read.

The printout for the Sight Sound Inventory includes subtest scores of numbers of students per class who have mastered passing criteria for each specific letter-sound. This provides a quick grouping mechanism. The teacher can use the Sight Sound Test at any subsequent time of the year as a kind of criterion referenced test to find out whether or not students have mastered items taught. Different stimulus words would be used. The scoring formula stays the same.

We are considering using labels or a printout which can easily be cut into strips and pasted on to student folders or prescription sheets for independent work. We are also working on Form C of the Sight Sound Inventory which will test student knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, roots, syllibication and contractions. These tests have also been used to indicate specific

objectives for certain school populations as well as serving as the measurement for the accomplishment of a school's objectives. Example - secondary schools have written as an objective that 75 percent of students in Programmed Reading classes (those scoring below the 16th percentile on California Achievement Test and exhibiting severe decoding deficiencies as measured by the Sight Sound Inventory) would show mastery on Form B(second level) by the end of the school year. This testing effort has evolved as an integral part of the diagnosis-prescription-instruction and evaluation-teaching strategy which is recommended for our teachers.

We were now concerned with finding a way in which the teacher could locate an entry point on the hierarchy of other reading skills as outlined in our Reading-Pupil Competencies (reading curriculum) - a point at which groups and individuals might be presumed to need instruction in study skills, comprehension, appreciation of literature, etc. The standardized test scores gave general placement data as to national norms. It did not tell a child's approximate reading level and on what level he might be expected to function in the various reading subskills. As we have said - the item analysis of the standardized Iowa Test of Basic Skills proved useless for all but the higher scoring students as it showed only that students, according to that test, needed instruction in everything. The students did not get enough items correct to give the teacher a pattern of strengths and weaknesses. Every skill was low on in-level tests. The information did not meaningfully discriminate among students for instruction.

So we returned to the test used often in elementary schools to determine a student's approximate reading level - the Informal Reading Inventory. This test has passages of varying degrees of difficulty, chosen for level of content, vocabulary, length of sentence, etc.

A student reading on Level 3 can be expected to comprehend meaning and vocabulary of approximately third grade in difficulty. We would begin instructing him on that level, finding of course that he is probably better trained in some reading subskills than in others.

First, we suggested that secondary teachers give a group reading inventory to four pupils at a time, using Secondary Informal Reading Inventory, a group of stories on reading levels 1-9 prepared by our English Division.

Next, we used a version of this inventory which could be given to a whole class - thus avoiding problems of classroom control. The element of close questioning of individual students had to be discarded. Papers were scored by hand. Since most teachers were marking over 150 papers, we found that tests were not being marked in a uniform fashion. Marking was often less than objective.

One teacher devised a multiple choice answer sheet based on the original questions for the Secondary Informal Reading Inventory. These again were hand scored with use of a template.

Our next step was to make the scoring of the multiple choice questions possible by machine. We ran ten pilot classes who took the IRI both in its original group form, and in the multiple choice format (same stories) with responses placed on a machine scorable card.

Correlation of resulting reading levels was checked. Poor questions were rewritten. Mastery criteria were adjusted where stories were found to have been questionably leveled. After the third tryout, we administered the Group Reading Inventory to all secondary students in grades 7-10.

The printout indicated the levels of stories which each student could correctly handle. A formula was devised by which the teacher could easily and quickly arrive at an approximate reading level for each student.

Cases in which the instructional reading level was not clear were few. These cases would be referred to the reading teacher for retesting. The students handled the machine scorable cards well. The test was less threatening than the standardized tests which had been a source of frustration and criticism for years. There were few double marks and teachers felt at ease giving this test in one period. Teachers began testing at the reading level judged approximate for the whole class on the basis of California Achievement Test scores and gave at least four levels of the inventory.

The printout resulting from the machine scorable Group Reading Inventory now gives teachers an approximate entry point on the reading skills ladder for individuals and groups of students. Students in our secondary schools are rostered so that a teacher should not have more than four reading levels in her class. The IRI is used with the California Achievement Test score for placement. The teacher will then consult the reading curriculum to ascertain what items should be taught under each subskill heading at each reading level. She can form many or few groups of students as her own competency and the time allows. She will have ordered materials on several levels based on information she has concerning her class. She can teach, test for mastery, go on, or reteach.

Mastery tests on the specific skills taught or criterion referenced tests have been devised by our English Division and by many companies to match their own materials. We need now to make the mastery tests for each subskill machine scorable and then our testing design will be a firm foundation on which the secondary teachers of reading can build their instruction.

This concept is very different from the idea of testing as the reporting of our students' success or failure according to national norms. It helps teachers to start students where they are and move them forward - up the ladder of reading pupil competencies - competing not against the national norm but against themselves.